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North Korea: Coming to Grips With Chun Doo Hwan

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Summary

The consolidation of power by South Korean President Chun Doo Hwan and the US decision to defer indefinitely any further US troop withdrawals have set back North Korea's efforts to weaken and isolate Seoul. Pyongyang has reacted to these events by playing down its earlier offer to hold a dialogue with Seoul and by intensifying its criticism of both South Korea and the United States.

Pyongyang has also started a new diplomatic campaign to attract foreign support for its longstanding scheme for joining the two Koreas in a confederation. Because of the strong mistrust and antipathy between the two Koreas, the scheme is inherently unfeasible, but by putting it forward, the North hopes to discourage movement toward greater international acceptance of the two Koreas status quo.

The objective of North Korea's "peace offensive" is to establish conditions that will make it possible for Pyongyang to achieve its ultimate goal—reunification on its own terms. Pyongyang thus continues to try to engage the United States in talks aimed at eliminating the US troop presence in the South. Except for occasionally infiltrating its agents into the South, the North continues to avoid actions that could lead to renewed tensions along the Demilitarized Zone.

At some point, of course, North Korea might elect to resume more provocative actions along the Demilitarized Zone or elsewhere to underscore the danger to the United States of continued involvement on the peninsula and to increase the pressures on the Chun government.

North Korea's adherence to its patient political strategy evidently reflects Pyongyang's belief that over the long run South Korea's staunch anti-Communist line will weaken if the "threat from the North" seems to recede. Pyongyang probably also believes that its own moderate behavior and the possibility of growing disillusionment in Washington with South Korea still offer the surest path toward a loosening of the US–South Korean security relationship—the greatest obstacle to reunification on its terms. North

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Korea's deliberate approach presumably also reflects a recognition in Pyongyang that its other options are few, riskier, and no more certain of success.

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Goal of Reunification Unchanged

North Korean political initiatives on reunification of the Korean peninsula have been an on-again, off-again aspect of relations between the two Koreas for over 20 years. Pyongyang at times has focused on selling its unification schemes abroad, while at others it has pushed for a dialogue with the South to discuss its unification formula. The initiatives by the North usually are timed to take advantage of an opportunity presented by international events or developments in the South, or to guard against some perceived threat to Pyongyang's interests.

Pyongyang's long-term goal remains reunification on its own terms – that is, a united Korea under Communist control. The North is aware of the strong, anti-Communist sentiment in the South and knows that political initiatives alone will not achieve its objectives. Instead, by holding out the prospect that the two sides can somehow peacefully resolve their differences, Pyongyang hopes to advance certain longstanding interim objectives. The North hopes to:

- Deflect international pressure for a more permanent "two Koreas" solution.
- Encourage further US troop withdrawals.
- Undermine stability and cohesiveness in South Korea.

Over the past 10 years, North Korea has emphasized the pursuit of its objectives through political and diplomatic means; there has been no resurgence of the kind of armed guerrilla attacks that were mounted against South Korean and US forces in the late 1960s. At the same time, however, the North has greatly increased the capability of its ground forces, especially for offensive operations. This buildup—at great economic and social costs to the regime—indicates that Pyongyang continues to view the threat or the use of force as an essential ingredient in achieving reunification.

North Korea continues to be constrained from exercising its military option by a complex set of political and military factors. These include the US security commitment and the presence of US forces in the South, the strength of the South Korean armed forces, the relative stability of the government in Seoul, and the desire of China and the USSR to maintain the status quo on the peninsula. Through its "peace offensive," North Korea seeks to remove or at least weaken these constraints.

The North's First Gambit

The assassination of South Korean President Park Chung Hee in October 1979 presented North Korea with a unique opportunity to take advantage of the unsettled political situation in South Korea. In a letter to the South Korean Prime Minister, Pyongyang offered to hold talks on reunification at the prime ministerial level. The letter, addressed to the Prime Minister in his official government title, marked a significant shift on the part of Pyongyang. Heretofore, the North had been extremely wary of referring publicly to the "Republic of Korea" for fear of conferring legitimacy on its arch rival.

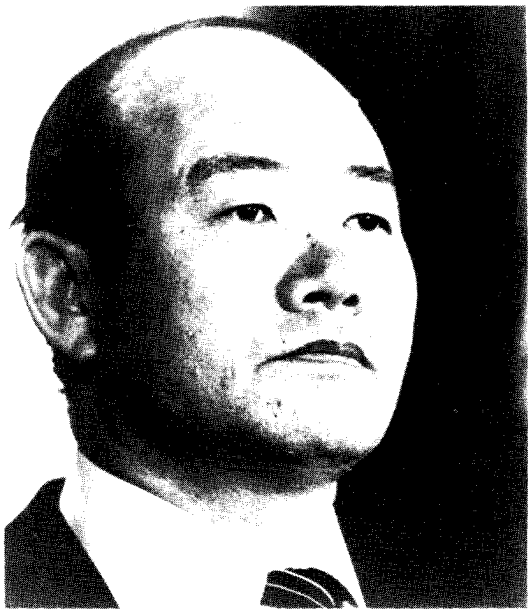
This conciliatory move seemed to reflect greater confidence in Pyongyang about its ability to set the tempo and direction of developments following Park's demise. Seoul responded cautiously to the North's initiative. Although wary of Pyongyang's intentions, Seoul did not want to appear intransigent or weak. Working-level delegates from the two sides began meeting at Panmunjom in February 1980 to hammer out an agreed agenda for the talks.

From the beginning the Northern delegates attempted to drag out the preliminary talks by insisting on an open-ended agenda that they knew the South Koreans would find unacceptable. Pyongyang probably anticipated a period of prolonged uncertainty and division in the South as the interim government under acting President Choi Kyu Hah attempted to guide the country through constitutional reform and a presidential election. By keeping the preliminary talks going, the North Koreans evidently sought to undercut Seoul's use of the "threat from the North" to mobilize popular backing and to justify strict internal controls. By raising expectations about the dialogue, the North also presented the interim government in South Korea with an important issue demanding skillful management.

The sharp crackdown on dissident activity in South Korea in May 1980 and the consolidation of power by Chun Doo Hwan, then head of the security services, altered North Korean expectations. Pyongyang responded at first by stretching out the interval between the contacts at Panmunjom, and in September 1980 it suspended the contacts altogether.

North Korea also intensified its criticism of South Korea in general and Chun Doo Hwan in particular. Loudspeaker broadcasts across the Demilitarized Zone, which stopped following Park's death in October 1979, were resumed in September.

South Korean President Chun Doo Hwan



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A New Tack

In October 1980 North Korea tried a new tack by reviving its longstanding proposal for joining North and South Korea in a confederation. Essentially, North Korea proposed that the two sides unite in a single national entity while each maintain its separate identity as a regional government. Under this arrangement, North and South Korea supposedly would be permitted to retain existing political and social systems and beliefs.

South Korea opposes the confederation scheme, arguing with considerable justification that it is premature to consider a political union between two such mutually antagonistic governments and societies. Seoul traditionally has advocated more limited, confidence-building measures such as family visits and mail exchange as a first step.

The North's confederation scheme has attracted support from among many Third World countries, which lack the resources or inclination to subject Pyongyang's position to close scrutiny. At the party congress last October, North Korean President Kim Il-song, in a move intended to enhance the attractiveness of the confederation proposal, equated the establishment of a confederation with the achievement of reunification itself. This refinement represents a major change in the way Pyongyang characterizes its attitude toward confederation. In the past Kim had portrayed the confederation as merely an interim step on the path to ultimate reunification.

North Korean President Kim Il-song

Kim's new formulation has aroused considerable foreign interest, even among knowledgeable Western observers. On the surface, it makes it appear that North Korea is willing to settle for a largely symbolic union designed to meet Kim Il-song's long-cherished goal of a de jure unified state while in fact perpetuating an indefinite extension of the "two Koreas" status quo. According to this line of reasoning, Kim Il-song has put forward a formula that could become the basis for an accommodation with the South.

Accompanying North Korean commentary makes clear, however, that Pyongyang is not searching for a token reunification and that implementation of Pyongyang's scheme would substantially alter the status quo. The much-touted 10-point policy that North Korea advocates for the confederated state stipulates, for example, that the two sides form a unified national army, an impossibility given the decades of mutual animosity and distrust. Moreover, the North's proposal calls for a unified government and a common foreign policy without addressing the critical questions of power sharing or of reconciling conflicting political views.

Chun's Counteroffensive

Chun Doo Hwan, in a move that typifies his flair for the dramatic, in January 1981 proposed a summit meeting with Kim Il-song without preconditions. He reiterated this offer in June and has even agreed to discuss North Korea's own reunification formula. Perhaps with the Middle East summitry in mind, Chun argues that it will take talks at this level to get a dialogue started again between the two Koreas. Chun, who is beginning a seven-year term, says he prefers to deal with Kim Il-song—a known quantity—rather than at some later time with Kim's son, Kim Chong-il, who is

being groomed to succeed his father. Chun's summit proposal has put the North on the defensive. (In the early 1970s, North Korea itself proposed such a meeting.) Rather than attack the summit concept, Pyongyang has tried to undercut Chun's personal legitimacy, arguing that he seized power illegally.

Indeed, Chun promises to be an even tougher adversary than the late President Park. Seoul has not only seized the initiative on the dialogue but is competing more vigorously with Pyongyang on the diplomatic front. Seoul, borrowing from North Korean tactics, has launched a sustained propaganda campaign to enlighten foreign observers about Pyongyang's own domestic economic and social problems.

Limited Options

The emergence of a strong centralized government under Chun and the suspension of US troop withdrawals have dashed North Korea's hopes that the obstacles confronting it would soon disappear. The North now probably sees only limited options open to it. Pyongyang could revert to fomenting trouble along the Demilitarized Zone in an attempt to influence developments on the peninsula in its favor. This would involve more aggressive actions than the present policy of periodically infiltrating small reconnaissance teams and political agents into the South.

The objective of a prolonged campaign of more substantial harassing actions presumably would be to underscore to the United States the danger of keeping its forces in South Korea and to exploit any political unrest in the South. North Korea learned during the 1960s, however, that armed intrusions into the South and troublemaking along the Demilitarized Zone only served to stiffen South Korean resolve and to enhance Seoul's security ties with the United States.

Available evidence indicates that Pyongyang, for the present at least, is planning to adhere to its patient political strategy. On the diplomatic front, North Korea will continue its efforts to attract support in the Third World, especially in the nonaligned movement. Late this summer, North Korea will host an international conference on agriculture under the auspices of the nonaligned movement. Despite its well-publicized foreign debt problem and sluggish industrial growth, the North has increased production in the agricultural sector and Pyongyang will use the conference to advertise its success in this area. Through such devices, North Korea hopes to improve its image and acceptability and thereby increase political support for its position on Korean reunification.

North Korea's adherence to this strategy evidently reflects Pyongyang's belief that—despite recent setbacks—the long-term trends are developing in

its favor. North Korea may view the tumultuous events of the past two years in the South as a reliable sign that there will be further upheavals and that its moderate behavior ultimately will weaken South Korea's staunch, anti-Communist political and social fabric. Pyongyang may calculate that this will not only increase the South's vulnerability but will create new strains in US–South Korean relations, loosening the security relationship in the process. North Korea's deliberate approach also reflects its own appraisal that there are few other options available.